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ABSTRACT

This study was developed to examine some possible reasons for the poor transition outcomes of students with exceptional needs even when provided with the structure and support of an Individualized Education Program, certified teachers, limited class sizes, and transition support. An extensive review of the literature precedes the research report. The report notes that postsecondary adult education theory assumes that high school graduates possess the basic competencies for self-directed learning. The study used the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Survey with 10 graduating seniors identified as either learning disabled or emotionally disturbed. All student scores fell in the lower 16th percentile range on self-directed learning readiness. Discussion of results focuses on the lack of "mesh" between secondary and postsecondary educational theory and the need to include the development of self-directed learning skills in the secondary special education curriculum. Contains 35 references. (DB)

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A Need for Curricular Revision in Public School Special Education

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Abstract: Students with exceptional educational needs (EEN) have been provided with both the structure and the support of an Individual Education Plan (IEP), specially certified teachers, limited class sizes and transition support. Yet, follow-up studies show that a large number of these same students, upon graduation from high school, are unable to find employment or to enter post-secondary education with any significant degree of success. What these studies do not determine, however, is exactly why such grim transition statistics exist. Hence, the purpose of this study is to take a critical look at the ability of high school seniors with EEN to transition into post-secondary roles. Central to this study are two factors: 1) Post-secondary adult education theory with its assumptions that high school graduates already possess the basic competencies for self-directed learning; and 2) Measurement of the readiness of graduating seniors with EEN to be self-directed learners. Results from the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Survey (SDLRS) of graduating seniors with EEN indicate that these seniors scored significantly lower in readiness for self-directed learning with all scores falling in the lower 16% of the scale.

Even more than the "average" high school graduate, the former special education student may face periods of unemployment, underemployment or part-time work. Sitlington, Frank, and Carson (1992) reported that individuals with mild disabilities lag behind those without disabilities in virtually every indicator of economic activity. They report that high school graduates with exceptional educational needs were judged to have made a "successful" transition from high school to a post-secondary environment in less then ten percent of their cases. Figures reported by the Department of Education (1992) reveal that among all graduating seniors who had exceptional educational needs, only 29.2% have full time jobs one year later; the average wage of those jobs was reported at $4.35 per hour.

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Even five years after graduation, the employment rate for graduates with learning disabilities (LD) was reported to have climbed and stabilized at only 60% to 70% --- or, 30% to 40% unemployment among a group of high school graduates who have received special services (Shapiro and Lentz, 1991).

This disillusioning post-secondary employment and continuing education outlook for handicapped youth (Fairweather & Shaver, 1991; Shor, 1987), has raised questions about the effectiveness of special education in general.

Change or Reform

It is precisely because follow-up studies have indicated such poor results, that special education is experiencing great pressure to change. Kauffman (1993) suggests that special education should and will be reshaped, then raises the question of how it should change.

Radical reformers argue that special education should be fundamentally restructured and point to the results of follow-up studies that continue to indicate less then satisfactory outcomes for most students with exceptional educational needs, despite the best intentioned efforts of federal legislation. Reynolds (1991) notes that to break away from this current system will involve a major gestalt switch. Likewise, Cummins (1992) suggests that special education is close to a paradigm shift. Others argue that the paradigm that underscores the structure of special education is defective (Telfer, Jennings & Mottley 1991; Lipsky & Gartner,

1989). Hocutt, Martin and McKinney (1991) argue that radical restructuring reforms like the Regular Education Initiative (REI) or programs like Wisconsin's new vocational program --- Tech-Prep (Levine, 1992), will fundamentally change special education.

In contrast to radical reform, Kauffman (1991, 1993), Bickel and Bickel (1986), and others, argue that proponents have exaggerated both the failures of present structures and the advantages of their proposed restructuring.

The most significant concern that the current special education paradigm has addressed has been the identification of and equal access to education for students with disabilities (Ysseldyke, Thurlow & Bruininks, 1992). Kuhn (1970) could have forecasted the current problems of this well-intentioned initial paradigm when he wrote: "...the first received paradigm is usually felt to account quite successfully for most of the observations and experiments... further development...calls for the construction of elaborate equipment, the development of an esoteric vocabulary and skills, and a refinement of concepts that increasingly lessens their resemblance to their usual common-sense prototypes" (p. 64). As "special" education developed its own set of learning materials, tests, and credentials for teaching professionals, the original paradigm became insulated and reified.

The historic humanistic ideals of the intent of the law were lost on the positivism necessary for implementation.

However, before the entire paradigm is discarded, it would be more useful to explore all the variables that impact successful transition of students with exceptional educational needs. Using

the ideals of the intent of the law and the current legal and economic support structures, perhaps the special education curriculum should turn from preparing students for job placement to preparing them to function in adult roles --- to include continuing education as self-directed learners.

Shor (1987) labels as "intellectual suicide," the pragmatic choice between learning earning-producing skills and learning how to think (p. 23).

Although not a gestalt switch nor necessarily a paradigm shift, a refocusing on the "mesh" between secondary special education and adult education theories could bring about the needed change in the curriculum, while protecting the hard-won rights of students with exceptional educational needs.

Employability Skills or Literacy

The perceived importance attached to employability training in the school setting for students with exceptional educational needs, is exemplified by Passmore (1989) in writing a chapter titled: *Economics of Transition*. He argues: "Work, then, is something that we do to *become* someone." He continues: "If you have not successfully made the transition from school to work, you are a long way from maturity, responsibility, and admission to the citizenry" (p. 45).

This very narrow view of education as "training for employment," is an example of the attitude that has driven the curriculum development in special education for many years; it is

the ability to contribute economically to society that is viewed as the measure of an individual's worth. However, it will be very difficult for anyone to keep pace with the changing nature of the workplace without continuing their education past high school. Effective and productive workers in the twenty-first century must have the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to compete in a global world economy that is primarily service and knowledge oriented. According to Johnson and Packer (1987), most of the new wealth created between now and the next century will be in service industries.

Lipsky and Gartner (1989) argue that when disabled students are tracked into "special" programs, they are generally excluded from the "frills" of art, computer literacy, music, and even physical education. Although these students may follow the traditional high school academic curriculum (with special adaptation), who is included or excluded from participation in the "frills" of education and who does or doesn't get to use the limited resources of the local school system, is determined by the labels students are provided. The "need" to teach the basic skills to students with exceptional educational needs is supported by diagnostic instruments and surveys that show the child as deviating from the expected normal development or assumed community standards for behavior and conduct. The "frills" of a well-rounded education are systematically withheld from students in special education programs --- using scarce resources on this population is viewed as wasteful.

A low achieving student would only be expected (and trained) to fill low-status jobs. The argument could then be made that the special education curriculum need only address low-level skill acquisition classes to fulfill those entry level positions (Apple, 1987). Making assumptions about upward mobility through self-directed adult education programs would even be viewed as unacceptable.

Unfortunately, high school graduates from special education programs often have the forbearance needed for unskilled labor, but are devoid of the problem-solving skills necessary to function in the workplace or the interest to pursue continuing adult education. Continuing education is not valued by graduates of special education programs but avoided, and social or economic mobility is curtailed. Perhaps, it is not so much the necessity for teaching employability skills that should drive the special education curriculum --- although those skills are essential, but an emphasis on the needs of students with EEN to continue learning both in the workplace and in their personal lives.

The question that should be raised then becomes --- are we educating all students to achieve their optimal level of literacy? Or, are we limiting the curriculum and, thereby, the kinds of knowledge to which certain groups of students within the school have access? Apple (1987) presents this concern in slightly different language: "For a society to be just it must, as a matter of both principle and action, contribute most to the advantage of the least advantaged" (p. 12).

Literacy is certainly a complicated and many-faceted phenomenon, and not an easy term to examine. Perhaps John Dewey (1964), defined it best when he wrote: "To be informed...is to have at command the subject matter needed for an effective dealing with a problem, and for giving added significance to the search for solution and to the solution itself" (p. 367).

The concept of both a body of information and the ability to use it in a meaningful way would seem to be the most appropriate understanding of literacy. Literacy then becomes the basis for learning, and can be enlarging and facilitative rather than deterministic and limited. Taking these two concepts separately may help delineate what it is to be "literate," and exactly what it is that students (including students with exceptional educational needs), should expect of their public schools.

If we assume that Dewey's "to have at hand the subject matter" constitutes an equivalent to learned subject matter content, then literacy itself is only half explained. The second half of the concept would revolve around experience and actually having the capacity for "effective dealing with a problem."

An analogy that provides a rather straightforward look at literacy that incorporates learned skills and knowledge, and the capacity and commitment to go beyond based on experience, comes from Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* (Lazerson, M., McLaughlin, J., McPherson, B. and Bailey, S., 1990):

> Twain's getting to know the river, Joseph Featherstone tells us, is a classic American expression of a metaphor for learning. Twain learns how to navigate the river at a young age. He learns every shoal, snag, and sandbar. These are the basic skills. But no sooner has he memorized their locations and peculiarities than he has to modify or forget them, and learn other spots, for the river never stops changing its course. Twain must simultaneously remember the reality of what existed in the river and imagine how different forces and conditions are likely to change it....In the process of learning, we, like Twain, continually remake our education, ourselves, and our ways of coping with and understanding the world (p. 67).

The knowledge or content of a particular subject area is insufficient to qualify an individual as literate --- an ability to use that knowledge and apply it in solving some meaningful problem is also necessary. Likewise, learning that is limited to a set of employability tasks within a vocational education track, does not make one literate without the content knowledge to support that skill training.

Dewey (1933) again addressed literacy in a dual manner when he argued that thinking was both an internal and external process. He viewed reflective thinking (critical thinking), as relating abstract ideas to external things themselves. He further placed considerable emphasis on both experience and reflection. Knowledge resulted from the constant interplay between internal and external processes and was constantly evolving. It appears that to be a critical thinker, one needs to be self-directed; conversely, to be a self-directed learner, one needs to be a critical thinker. Knowledge would then be the result of the learner's integrating new ideas, perspectives, and values into existing cognitive structures and collaboratively justifying the resulting understanding (Garrison, 1992).

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What we mean by literacy ought to involve an emphasis on the possession of both knowledge and task skills. It is little wonder that post-secondary employment statistics for handicapped youth are disillusioning. Skill or employability training only provides a very narrow orientation to education that does not challenge students with exceptional educational needs to become literate. Rather, the curriculum for students with EEN appears only to address the skills half of Dewey's thoughts on what it means to "be informed," and not the command of the subject matter.

Self-Directed Adult Education

Instead of a fragmenting "either/or" scenario as just described, it would seem to be more worthwhile to examine the "mesh" between secondary education and assumptions made by adult education.

First, it is becoming increasingly clear that the economy depends more than ever for its success on the intelligence, flexibility, skills, and confidence of the workforce (Diez & Moon, 1992). The accelerating pace of technological and social change now makes ongoing workplace education a requirement of most businesses (Knox, 1993). Although adult education theory continues to assume that learning in adulthood is voluntary, research indicates that the coercive nature of workplace power, authority and control, show this to be a myth (Stalker 1993).

If graduates from special education programs are to compete successfully in this kind of employment environment, transition planning must be concerned with more than just "placement" on a

job. Graduates of special education programs must be prepared to continue learning --- to be as self-directed as their peers.

If continuing education (in its broadest terms) is in fact no longer a choice, but a condition necessary for both continued employment and advancement, then self-directed learning needs to be a skill that all secondary school graduates need to possess. And, if special education graduates are less self-directed then the general population, it is a skill that must be specifically taught through the secondary special education curriculum.

If the concept of self-directed learning is not addressed in the secondary special education classroom, graduating students with EEN will be destined to fall further behind their nonhandicapped peers in all socioeconomic areas.

Professional degree programs at post-secondary schools are also being developed on the assumption that learners attending their classes have a high degree of self-directedness. An example of the "requirement" to be self-directed can be seen in the introduction to the Programs in Management (1994) at Cardinal Stritch College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The focus is on two critical learning objectives:

> The first of these is shared participant responsibility for self-directed learning and small group learning dynamics. Professional and personal growth require that individuals develop the skills necessary to manage their own learning...participants are expected to seek answers to their questions, identify and develop resources for their concerns, and take charge of their own learning. For this reason, the programs are designed to provide the structure and support necessary to encourage independence and self-direction.
>
> The second objective is to develop the interpersonal skills necessary for effective participation in groups.

> Study groups are an integrated part of the (Programs in Management for Adults) PMA educational model. The groups are comprised of three to five students each and meet weekly outside of class. Study groups function as mutual support mechanisms through which students can learn more efficient problem solving from the professional expertise of peers....This concept of shared learning responsibility is an integral element in the College's educational philosophy.

Adding self-directed learning as a basic competency to the school curriculum to prepare graduates with exceptional educational needs for transition would equalize their employment obtaining *and* retaining ability. However, determining if secondary students with exceptional educational needs have acquired the skills of critical thinking and have a readiness for self-directed adult learning is problematic.

Measurement of Self-Directed Learning

Readiness for self-direction may be viewed as the degree to which persons perceive themselves to possess the skills and attitudes generally associated with adult learning (Candy, 1991). Two scales have been developed to measure readiness for self-directed learning.

Guglielmino (1977) developed the *Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale* (SDLRS) as a measure and a predictor of an individual's perceived readiness for self-directedness in learning. A second survey instrument that identifies self-directed learners according to personality characteristics was developed by Oddi in 1986 and titled the *Oddi Continuing Learning Inventory* (OCLI).

Landers (1989) compared the strengths and weaknesses of both the OCLI and the SDLRS. His results indicate that the OCLI and SDLRS are very similar instruments with a correlation coefficient of .606. He further identifies the internal reliability of the SDLRS as being stronger then the OCLI and recommends the SDLRS as the instrument of choice to measure self-direction in learning. The OCLI has not had as much exposure as the SDLRS and carries a warning that it should only be used with populations that match the major validation studies --- college undergraduate and graduate students. Studies using the SDLRS have involved a diverse population of students ranging from intellectually gifted elementary students to undereducated adults in a rural setting.

Study Design

An appropriate use of the SDLRS in the secondary public schools would then be an attempt to measure the readiness of all seniors to engage in self-directed learning. Graduating seniors are within "weeks" of being classified as adult learners and falling under the assumptions of adult education theory. A large survey of all graduating seniors would, no doubt, yield a bell-shaped curve indicating a normal distribution along a continuum of low to high readiness for self-directed learning. A score of 214 on the SDLRS would indicate that an individual's learning readiness matches the mean; scores above the mean would indicate a higher degree of self-directedness and scores below the mean would indicate a lower degree of self-directedness. In effect, this was

the historical development of the SDLRS, and other studies have compared specific populations against this distribution of scores.

Specifically this study compared students with exceptional educational needs and labeled as learning disabled (LD) and emotionally disturbed (ED), with the preexisting distribution of scores on the SDLRS.

Procedure

The population sampled with the SDLRS were twelfth grade students with exceptional educational needs labeled as ED and LD, and with sufficient high school credits for graduation from the Milwaukee Public School district. The high school within this urban setting with the largest population of graduating seniors with exceptional education needs was selected. The intent was to survey all the graduating seniors identified as ED or LD. Scheduling problems, community work assignments, and absences for illness, reduced the number to be surveyed to ten (a five percent sample) --- six female and four male students. The SDLRS was administered to this remaining group at two separate sessions with all ten students completing the entire survey.

In accordance with the instruction for the survey, students were allowed as much time as needed to respond to the SDLRS. Student responses were recorded directly alongside the question on a Likert style scale. To assure standardization of all introductory statements and directions for the survey, a prepared sheet of instructions was read prior to each administration of the survey.

The *t* statistic was used to construct a sampling distribution for the hypothesis (H_0:m = 214):

> Does the special education curriculum contribute to the readiness of students with exceptional education needs to become self-directed adult learners, as measured by scores on the SDLRS?

Results

Using an α of .05, the observed mean of 190.2 (9.92) was significantly different from the hypothesized mean of 214, $t(9) = 7.1$. All individual student scores fell in the lower 16% range. This narrow range and conformity of the students' scores on the SDLRS add strength to the predictive results of this survey: $\sigma^2 = 5.22$.

Discussion

Transition from high school to a post-secondary environment has become a problematic issue for students with exceptional educational needs. National surveys have pointed out some of the problems and circumstances encountered by youth with handicaps during and following their attendance in secondary school. Sitlington, Frank, and Carson (1992) reported that individuals with mild disabilities lag behind those without disabilities in virtually every indicator of economic activity. They report that high school graduates with EEN were judged to have made a "successful" transition from high school to a post-secondary environment in less then ten percent of their cases.

The potential reason for the poor results of the follow-up studies is suggested by this study --- that there is a lack of a "mesh" between secondary and post-secondary educational theory. The students in this study were within weeks of graduating and falling under the assumptions of adult education theory. Yet according the results obtained from this study, these students were unprepared to function as self-directed adult learners in the workplace or in formal educational settings.

Interestingly, Grow (1991), argues that self-directed learning can be intentionally developed through planned educational interventions. The infusion of self-directed learning is based on the work of Mezirow (1985) who has developed a theory of learning that simultaneously accounts for the need to develop job skills and the fact that this learning is intermeshed with learning about the structure of the organization and the social environment. Several models have been developed that support the gradual development of self-directedness in students as a teacher-facilitated approach (Treffinger, 1975; Brookfield, 1981; Ziegahn, 1992). Candy (1991) argues that "self-directed learning --- especially of discipline-based knowledge --- calls on attitudes, skills, and knowledge that can be intentionally developed through planned educational interventions" (p. 342).

Adapting the special education curriculum to include the development of self-directed learning skills might well increase the ability of high school graduates with exceptional education needs to obtain --- and more importantly, to retain employment.

I would argue that we are preparing high school students for an entire lifetime, not simply training them for the tasks of their first job. It appears that, if twelve years of public school education does not meet an individual's needs, then it should at least pave the way for continued learning through an individual's lifespan.

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